Written by **Sam Blumenfeld** on September 6, 2012

On Teaching and Tutoring (Part 4)

Good tutors learn a great deal from their students. Each student is different, requiring the tutor to be flexible, patient, and creative. I always enjoyed the challenge of a new student because it required much ingenuity on my part. And because I was being paid for my services, unlike the public schools which are "free," I had to show that my teaching was producing positive results.

One of the most challenging students I ever had was 14-year-old Neal Pulovsky, a 9th grader. On the day I started tutoring him in October 1975, I wrote the following in my journal:

> Started tutoring 14-year-old Neal Pulovsky this morning. He is supposedly a little hard of hearing, but I could not detect any such impairment. He reads at a second grade level. No sense of letter sounds, no accuracy. Obviously he too was mutilated by look-say. Arithmetic is spotty. He has a good hand for writing but can't write because he doesn't know how. All he really needs is careful, intensive instruction. He confused b's and d's, m's and n's. But all he really needs is intensive phonics drill. With him nonsense syllables will be useful. He needs to hear and see the difference between vowel sounds. He has no knowledge of vowels at all. Often interchanges a's and e's, long a's with short a's. He was very pleased at the end of the session and wanted homework to do. He yawned continually because he had stayed up to watch the Jerry Lewis movie.

I told his mother that he should get a good night's sleep before our tutoring sessions. As for his hearing problem, I suspected that it was classroom induced to provide an excuse for his not learning and his teachers not teaching. Neal was obviously the victim of pedagogic sloppiness, lack of precision and accuracy. And so, I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Several sessions later I wrote:

> Neal has a much better grasp of the short vowel sounds now. He knew the cards perfectly, pronouncing the short a, e, and i correctly. What a difference. I gave him the nonsense syllables to read. He did well. We are converting him from a sight reader to an alphabetic reader. So first we drill him in one-syllable forms, then we start working on multisyllabic words, breaking them up into the pronunciation units he's been drilled in.

A week later I wrote:

> Neal is an unfortunate example of the mess they can make of a youngster in public school. Today we started reading a hockey magazine, and his difficulty with some of the words is beginning to convince him that what I am trying to teach him is not only valid, but the only way to master reading. Until now much if it seemed too abstract to him, but his knowledge of the short vowels alone helped him a lot. It is beginning to make sense, and I could see it in the way his sleepy eyes have suddenly opened up as if to say "I see what you mean." It will take six months to a year for him to master the alphabetic system. He has to overcome a lethargy which has developed between him and the written word. Today, I think, he began to grasp what it's all about. He began to see,

> also, that it is something he can master.

After the next session I wrote:

> Neal is putting up a stiff resistance to learning the alphabetic system, but it's getting through to him. His eyes are opened wider these days and his resistance is more obvious and makes less sense. I think he's going to make a basic decision to learn and then be more receptive. Will use his interest in hockey as a focal point of reading.

On December 30, 1975 I wrote:

> Saw Neal today. Teaching him to tell time and understand the calendar. Nothing seems to arouse any interest. He is only interested in hockey. By teaching him to tell time I've discovered that he can't multiply. He does not listen when I explain things to him. If I as a tutor find it difficult to impart knowledge to such an idiot, then obviously school was a complete waste. He is a master of the blank look. Information slides off him like drops of water off a raincoat. He absorbs very little. It takes effort and repetition before anything gets through.
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> He knows nothing about fractions. So he can scarcely understand what we mean by a half-hour or quarter-hour. He never exhibits the slightest intellectual curiosity about anything. He asks no questions. He does not want to learn. His plaint is: "Do I have to?" Sometimes I suspect it is a put on, as if to say: "It isn't that I can't learn. I just don't want to learn."

Four days later I wrote:

> Working with Neal on telling time and the calendar. I noticed a glimmer of interest. I think his mastery of the clock will be an important step forward. We shall work on it until he knows it well. Time and the calendar are getting us into the solar system. I shall get him interested in the solar system as a project related to time and the calendar — an opening into science, astronomy, space, arithmetic, mathematics, history.
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> If he has any deficiency it seems to be in the area of symbolism. His lack of vocabulary and poor use of language indicates a linguistic weakness. It will be necessary to get him to improve his use of language. His favorite expression is "I don't know." By saying that, he avoids the need to use language.

I could see why he was neglected in the public school. No teacher would have had the patience to deal with someone they considered to be retarded. But I, on the other hand, saw his resistance to learning as a challenge. Later in the week, I wrote:

> Neal's defense against learning has just about crumbled. He realizes he can learn but that it takes effort. Fear of the future will spur him on to make the effort. Even when knowledge is as logically organized as I can make it, effort is required. But at least one learns. But if knowledge is poorly or incorrectly organized then no amount of effort will do any good. A child will gladly make the effort if the positive results are easily demonstrable by a sense of mastery. But when effort is rewarded by bewilderment, confusion, and a negative sense about one's abilities, then effort becomes useless.
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> Knowledge is so poorly organized in today's schools that most children get back little for the effort they put into their schoolwork. That is why cheating becomes so prevalent in the higher grades. The teachers cannot impart knowledge and therefore cannot recognize knowledge. They only recognize the "right answer" as given by the textbook.
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> What I've discovered about Neal is that he has no conception whatever of systematic knowledge. To

> him all knowledge or learning seems to be made up of a collection of unrelated, random facts. He sees no relationship of one thing to another. But after studying the clock, the solar system, and the calendar, I've given him some sense of relationship.

By now it was beginning to dawn on me that Neal was mentally deficient. The difficulty he had in learning to tell time was a sure indicator of a lack of reasoning power. And there were physical indications. His eyes were small, almond shaped and looked at if they were about to close. But I could not decide whether his retardation was a result of genetic factors or a lack of environmental stimulation. But by February, five months after having started teaching him, he finally was able to tell time. I wrote in my journal:

> What I have learned so far is that children can learn what you teach them, provided that what you teach is logical. Each child learns at a different speed. Neal's speed is slow and plodding. He learns through constant repetition. He requires tremendous patience on the part of the teacher. But he does learn.... But because he also has a resistance to learning, a pattern of not wanting to learn, of believing that he can't learn, it's quite possible that he has crippled his own mental abilities as a defense mechanism of some sort.

I decided to give him something more interesting to read. I picked up a book about the fifty states at Goodwill Industries and decided to teach him some geography. Later in the month I wrote: "Neal is beginning to make good progress. Today he completed two states instead of just one. He can tell time, and he is learning multiplication. His handwriting is improving, with indentations, capitals, etc. His spelling is terrible." Further on that month, I wrote:

> Yesterday's session with Neal was interesting. He read his writing on Idaho and Illinois. We practiced some spelling. I continued on phonics review. Then we moved to multiplication. He could not count in nines. "I'm dumb," he said. "I can't do it. I was left back in school." I didn't know what to make of it. He is finally confronting his learning ability. I asked him if he had found it difficult to learn what I had taught him. He said no. So I told him he simply didn't realize that learning required effort and practice and that he had to learn how to practice, and he had to apply self discipline to his practice.
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> His awareness of his "dumbness" indicates that he is learning. He thought he was dumb because he hadn't already learned the multiplication table when he had hardly drilled himself on it. So he judges his ability to learn on whether he can learn instantly or not, not realizing that learning requires practice.

But Neal's basic problem was his paucity of language development. That could only be remedied by several years of vocabulary development. Language is the tool of learning. He needed a dedicated teacher with the patience of Job, and there is no telling how much he could actually learn. In May of 1976, I attended a conference of the Reading Reform Foundation. But when I got back to Boston, I wrote:

> I had one of the great pleasures of my life the other day when Neal, reading the history book, said, "Don't tell me" when he got to a difficult word and read it himself. What a change from the "I don't know" syndrome. While I was gone he did three states. He is improving on all fronts. To increase his vocabulary I am using a new method: I list all the new words he reads, then have him repeat them at each session so that he becomes accustomed to hearing them, seeing them, and speaking them. He wants to learn. There is no resistance whatever....

> Neal has never learned how to use his brain. All his life he's believed that learning consisted of guessing and immediate magical knowing. Guessing as a way of learning is another bad habit that sight reading systems inculcate. He is slowly coming out of his misconceptions. That is why he seems dumb. He has never used his brain as a thinking instrument, as an instrument of logic.
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> The other day, in response to something I said, Neal replied, "I'm not dumb." That's quite a change for only seven months.

Indeed, I considered that moment as one of the highlights of my tutoring career. I had finally liberated Neal from his prison of ignorance. And I could see how the school had created that prison by making him believe that learning was a matter of guessing, and unless you were a good guesser you could never learn.

There is, of course, much more to this story than I am able to tell in a single article. The adventure of liberating a young mind is without equal in any other intellectual pursuit. Unfortunately, today's teachers are taught how to imprison the mind, not liberate it.